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AUTHOR Kitao, Kenji; Kitao, S. Kathleen
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ABSTRACT

In intercultural communication, linguistic competence must be accompanied by an understanding of the associations that the speakers share. For communicating in a foreign language, the most important kind of association is indicative association, which is related to the literature, customs, and history of a people. When Japanese people communicate with Americans in English, this kind of association often causes problems, and those related to color are a large, important group that Japanese people must understand in order to communicate successfully with Americans. Americans seem to have a greater awareness of color than do Japanese people, with more terms for colors and shades and more color associations. Americans and Japanese do not necessarily use the same color terms for the same objects. They share some color associations, but many are different, and Japanese people are often not familiar with color connotations in American culture and daily life, such as the association of blue with depression, obscenity, nobility, loyalty, strictness, and lack of oxygen. Since the use of color terminology is frequently based on cultural convention rather than descriptions of reality, Japanese who communicate with Americans need to learn the patterns and significance of color expressions in American culture. (MSE)

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A STUDY OF COLOR ASSOCIATION DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICANS AND JAPANESE

Kenji Kitao
(Doshisha University)

S. Kathleen Kitao
(Michigan State University)

ABSTRACT

In communicating with someone of a different culture, linguistic competence in the target language is not enough. It is also necessary to understand the associations that speakers of the target language share. Associations help form a bridge between language and meaning. If communicators have different associations, they may interpret the same sentence differently. For communicating in a foreign language, the most important type of association is indicative association, which is related to the literature, customs, history of a people. When Japanese people communicate with Americans in English, this is the type of association that often causes them problems, since they do not know much about the indicative associations of Americans. Associations and conventions related to color are one area of indicative associations that may cause problems for Japanese people communicating in English. In this paper, we discuss the associations that Japanese and Americans have for common colors and some of the differences between these associations.

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Introduction

Japanese people often have difficulty communicating with Americans in English. Sometimes these problems are related to linguistic problems, but communication barriers are also often related to inadequate knowledge of the thought patterns of Americans and the associations that Americans share.[1]

Languages can be compared on different levels. A linguistic comparison, while it is useful for some purposes, will not reveal with all the significant differences, because language is also strongly related to the speakers' cultural background.[2] A Japanese trying to communicate with Americans must know something of the associations that Americans share. Therefore, communicating with Americans requires more than just learning the language itself; it also involves understanding its speakers and their associations.

Association

People use language to communicate their thoughts. A speaker has a concept. He converts the concept into verbal and nonverbal signs. The hearer converts the signs into a concept. If the concept of the hearer and the speaker are the same or similar, the communication has been successful. If they are different, the communication has not been successful.[3]

The speaker does not necessarily use all the signs that are required to communicate the concept that he has in mind. He may depend on associations to form a bridge between the signs and the concept. In this way associations are important in converting concepts into signs and signs into concepts. In areas where the speaker's and hearer's associations differ, misunderstandings will result if they are not aware of these differences.[4]

One type of association in indicative association, which is strongly related to history, literature, legend, custom, etc.[5] It is this type of association that causes Japanese people particular difficulties in communicating with Americans in English, since they are often not familiar with these aspects of American culture. For example, if a Japanese heard an American speaker say, "I feel blue," he would not understand the utterance unless he realized that Americans associate the color blue with depression and so the sentence means, "I feel depressed."

Thus, it is significant to study areas that effect association. This paper explores one aspect of association--that of color-related associations. In this paper, we will discuss colors Americans and Japanese are aware of; whether Americans and Japanese recognize the same color for the same thing; what color associations Americans and Japanese have.

Awareness of Color

Colors are in a continuous belt between purple and red. That belt is cut arbitrarily into many colors.[6] Approximately 7000 colors are recognized. Some cultures recognize more colors than others. Not all cultures recognize seven colors in the rainbow. Therfore, it is interesting to know which colors a particular group of people are most aware of.

Berlin and Kay, in a study of the Hurray Islands, list the following terms out of a larger list of more than thirty elicited test materials: white, black (and blue), red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and gray.[7]

Lenneberg and Roberts select eleven colors in the study of Zuni: white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, and gray.[8]

Compared to Japanese, English has more color terms. English also has more words for shades of colors. In Japanese, expressions like "the "the color of water" (light blue) or the "color of a mouse" (gray). Americans seem to have more awareness of color than Japanese people do.

The Associations of Colors

In preparation for a paper in an ethnolinguistics class, one of the authors surveyed Japanese and American students at the University of Kansas about objects associated with nine common colors: blue, red, yellow, green, orange, white, black, purple, and brown. Respondents were asked to list up to two objects associated with each color. The survey showed differences and similarities between the objects that Americans and Japanese people associate with objects and some of the cultural conventions related to colors.

Blue has strong associations with the sky, and the ocean for both Americans and Japanese. Some Americans listed jeans and this shows the popularity of jeans among American students and

demonstrates strong association of colors with things used in daily life.

Red associated with sunsets and blood by both Americans and Japanese. It is associated with the communist flag and lips for Americans and with fire for Japanese. Americans think of moon as white for Americans but yellow for Japanese. Many Americans wrote "paper." Some Americans associate the color with white people and thus listed "man" and "skin."

Black has a strong association with night for both Americans and Japanese. Americans have a strong association of black with black people and so they wrote "Negro," "man" and "skin."

Purple has a strong association with kings for the Americans respondents, and they also imagine cloth, velvet, robes, etc. However, this was not a strongly associated color for the Japanese respondents, and there is no characteristic association with purple for Japanese people.

Brown has association with earth and trees for both Americans and Japanese. Brown shoes seem popular in the United States and Japan, because many people wrote them down.

Americans and Japanese showed much similarity in recognizing colors. They usually agree on the names of colors for anything. Americans recognize more different colors and these colors are more complicated. Associations between colors and objects are based culture and experience. For example, distinctions among races is very important, particularly between white and black, in the United States. Americans have a very strong association of color with races and they are also more sensitive than the Japanese to the colors of hair, eyes, and skin, since these show more variety in the United States than in Japan.

Usage of color terminology is not necessarily based on observation. Use of color is often dependent on cultural convention, custom, or convenience. For example, all chalk boards were originally black and therefore were called blackboards. Even though many chalk boards are now green, they are still called blackboards. Also, Japanese people often use blue and green interchangeable. A green traffic light is described as being not green but blue. In Japanese, the term for asosogen (blue field) is used to describe a green field. Black tea is not black and green tea is not necessarily green. Orientals are described as being yellow, American Indians as red, Negroes as black, and

Caucasians as white, but in actuality, this is not necessarily so. Most skin colors are shades of brown. Colors are used according to the conventional of the culture.

Colors are sometimes used to describe contrasts, but these are also based on convention rather than observation. Typical contrasts are white and red and white and black. White wine is distinguished from red wine, but it is not white but clear. Red rice is pink rather than red. White pepper and black pepper are only white or black compared to one another. White metal is not white but only a contrast to iron (black). Human skin is not actually black or white but rather varying shades of brown.

Certain events are associated with colors. St. Patrick's Day is associated with green, Christmas with red and green, Easter with purple and yellow, the Fourth of July with red, white and blue, and Halloween with black and orange. The colors red and white are used at a Japanese celebration and yellow and white at Japanese funerals.

Color Connotations

The following is a review of the American connotations of some common colors and a comparison with Japanese ones. The following are some common colors and their connotations in English, with examples of related expressions, a comparison to their connotations in Japanese and different colors related to the same connotations for Japanese people. The examples come from American informants, dictionaries, and books on comparative culture.[9]

Americans use the following colors to describe races of people: Negroes are black; Caucasians are white; Orientals are yellow; American Indians are red and people from Latin America and their descendants are brown. In Japanese, the same colors are used in association with the first two races. However, American Indians are described as being doshoku (the color of copper). (It should be noted that, while the terms "black" and "white" are still used to denote races in English, "red," "yellow," and "brown" have come to be considered derogatory and are not often used any more.)

Usually, Americans are more specific with colors and use more color terms than Japanese. For example, kuro (black) is used for black, brown or dark. Therefore, kuroikao (black face) can be used to describe a very dirty face, the face of a black

person, or a suntanned face. In English, a suntanned face is described as brown, never black.

Blue

Blue in English has connotations of depression, obscenity, the best, nobility, loyalty, strictness, nothingness, and lack of oxygen.

depression

blue Monday
blue devils (a depressed feeling)
I feel blue.
Today is just a blue day.
I have the blues.
I am blue.
He is in a blue mood today.
He always sings the blues. (talks pessimistically)

The blues, a type of jazz music, is also related to this association of blue. This type of music is characterized by its melancholy sound, caused by playing certain notes, called blue notes, slightly flat.

In Japanese, no particular color is associated with depression.

obscenity

a blue film
blue stories

In Japanese, pink is the color that has the connotation of obscenity.

a pink film
a pink mood

the best

In the United States, blue, red and white indicate first, second, and third prizes respectively.

He got a blue ribbon.
blue chips (poker chips of high value)
They are blue chip stocks. (expensive, desirable stocks)

The governor appointed a blue ribbon panel. (a special panel of experts)

No particular colors are associated with prizes in Japan.

nobility

She has blue blood in her veins.
She is a blue blood/blue-blooded.

loyalty

She is true blue.

nothingness

The message came from out of the blue. (as from nowhere)

Blue can also be used in Japanese to indicate nothingness.

seiten no hekireki (thunder from a blue sky [a surprise out of nowhere])

lack of oxygen

She held her breath till she turned blue.
A blue baby was born.
I screamed until I was blue in the face.

In Japanese, blue is used to indicate pallidness, due either to illness or to shock, fear, etc.

Kare wa aoku natta. (He became blue [He became ill or turned pale from shock].)

aojiroi (pale [due to ill health])
aosameru (turn pale [due to either ill health or shock, fear, etc.])

Other expressions

blue-collar workers (industrial workers)
blue jacket (American soldier in the Revolutionary War)
blue stocking (a learned, bookish or pedantic woman; from the unconventional blue worsted stockings worn by the leading figure at literary meetings in 18th

century London)
blue plate special (an inexpensive restaurant meal served at a fixed price on a large plate, originally blue)
She talked a blue streak. (She talked fast, without pauses.)

Red

The connotations of red in English are communism, passion, anger, and shame or embarrassment.

communism

These people are reds. (These people are communists.)

passion

She is red hot. (She is excited.)

anger

He burned red.
She went red with anger.
He saw red.

shame or embarrassment

She had a red face.
There are going to be a lot of red faces around here when the news of that big mistake gets out.
He was red as a beet.

other expressions

red-light district (area of prostitution)
red neck (a poor white in the South)
red letter day (a special day)
red meat (meat that is red before cooking; beef or mutton)
I am in the red. (I am in debt.)
The project went into the red/into red ink.
They'll roll out the red carpet to welcome the prince. (give someone a good reception)
I cannot go there, because my father gave me the red light. (forbade me to go)
I had to wait for two hours because of all the red tape. (bureaucracy)

The connotations of red in Japanese are shame, anger, or embarrassment, clear or complete, communism, and celebration.

shame, anger, or embarrassment

akai kao (red face anger, shame, embarrassment)
Kare wa akaku natta. (He turned red [with anger, shame, or embarrassment].)
Kare wa makkani natte okotta. (He turned red with anger.)

communism

Kare wa aka da. (He is red [a communist].)

clear or complete

akauso (red [bare-faced] lie)
akanotanin (red [complete] stranger)
akahadaka (completely nude)
sekihin (very poor)

In English, black is the color with the connotation of completeness.

a black villain
a black lie

celebration

seki han (red rice, which Japanese people eat to celebrate certain things.)

Yellow

The connotation of yellow in English is cowardice.

You are yellow.
You are yellow-bellied.
You have a yellow streak down your back.

other expressions

yellow pages (part of a telephone book)
yellow metal (gold)

Yellow does not have any particular connotations in Japanese.

Green

The connotations of green in English are envy, inexperience, growth, and sickness, especially seasickness, and money.

envy

He turned green with envy when he saw Tom's new car.
He is green.
the green-eyed monster (jealousy)

inexperience or youthfulness

He is as green as grass.
He is a greenhorn at photography.
green recruits

growth

The Middle East is undergoing a green revolution.
He has a green thumb when it comes to roses. (He is good at growing roses.)

sickness

She turned green when the boat started rocking.
He turned green when he saw the terrible sight.

money

Give me some green. (Give me some money.)
Give me some greenbacks. (dollars)
She has a lot of green stuff.

other expressions

You've got a green light. (You have the go-ahead.)
greenhouse

The connotation of green in Japanese is plants.

ryokka (tree planting)
ryokuchi (green tract of land)
ryokuin (the shade of trees)
ryokuju (green-leaved trees)
ryokuso (green grass)

In Japanese blue (ao) and green are often used interchangeably, so they use ao for green to mean plants.

aoba (green leaves)
aonisai (striplings)
aoendo (green peas)
aokusa (green grass)
aomame (green beans)
aomono (green things [vegetables])
aotagai (unripened fruit)

Ao also has the connotation of inexperience and youth.

aonisai (green youth; green horn)
aozamurai (young soldiers; inexperienced soldiers)

White

The connotations of white are fear, innocence, virtue, anger, and virginity.

fear

She turned white as a ghost when she saw her brother, who she had thought was dead.
He went white as a sheet when he read the telegram.
He was white with terror.
Her lips were white with fear.

innocence or goodness

white magic
white lie

virtue

The hero rode on a white horse.
the good guys in the white hats

anger

He turned white with anger when he saw his girlfriend with a handsome guy.
He is white hot.

virginity

She did not wear a white wedding dress, because it was her second marriage.

other expressions

white trash (very poor white people in the South)
white supremacy (the belief that white people are superior and that they are intended to govern non-white people.

white metal (any of various light-colored alloys)
white plague (tuberculosis)
white hot steel (steel that is so hot [beyond red hot] that it glows white)
A soldier saw an angel in white (nurse) coming to his rescue.
He whitewashed his girlfriend. (minimized her faults)
There are white caps on the sea today. (waves with foam on top)
His great bargain turned out to be a white elephant. (something from which little profit or use is derived)
He showed the white tail when danger came. (behaved in a cowardly way)
white collar workers (office workers)
white goods (linens)
white sale (sale of white goods)
white lightening (homemade whiskey)
white potato

The connotations of white in Japanese is innocence, cleanliness, and coldness.

innocence

Kare wa shiro da. (He is innocent.)

cleanliness

masshirona table cloth (pure white tablecloth--implies that the whole room is clean)

coldness

shiroi me de miru (look coldly on [something])
shirakeru (become chilled; become less cheerful)

Black

The connotations of black are evil, anger, and mourning, confirmed or absolute, depressing or gloomy, and negative.

evil

They perform black magic. (magic with an evil purpose)
He is using black magic on me.
Pirates are black-hearted. (wicked)
She saw the betrayal as a black deed.
He is a black sheep of our family. (a person regarded as not so respectable or successful as the rest of his family or group)

anger

He gave me a black look.
His face was as black as thunder.

mourning

The mourners were dressed in black.

confirmed or absolute

He told a black lie.
a black villain

depressing or gloomy

Things look black.
black humor

negative

He is on the black list. (a list of persons who have been censured)
Because he cheated on the test, he got a black mark (a mark indicating something unfavorable on one's record)
He was black balled from joining a fraternity. (a negative vote)

other expressions

I saw a black cat this morning. (a symbol of coming bad luck.)
I got into the black. (out of debt)
black metal (iron)
He bought that watch on the black market. (a place or system for buying goods in violation of price controls or other restrictions)
blacksmith
black book (the book of black-listed persons)
little black book (address book with women's names)
black plague (bubonic plague)

The connotations of black (kuro) in Japanese are evil and formality.

evil

Kare wa kuro da. (He is guilty.)
Kare wa haraguroi. (He is black-hearted.)
Kare wa kuromaku datta. (He was the head of a criminal organization.)
kuroikiri (black fog [corrupt atmosphere])

formality

Kare wa kuroi sutsu o kite itta. (He went wearing a black suit. [This indicates formality.])

Japanese people wear black on formal occasions, including both funerals and weddings.

Purple

The connotations of purple are royalty, anger, passion, and elaborateness.

anger

He is purple with rage.
She is in a purple rage over the argument.

royalty

He was born to the purple.
He was cradled in the purple.

passion

She is in a purple passion. (very excited)

elaborateness

purple prose
His writing is purple.

The only connotation of purple (murasaki) in Japanese is royalty.

murasaki no kumo (imperial palace)
murasaki no miya (imperial palace)

Conclusion

In communicating with someone of a different culture, linguistic competence in the target language is not enough. It is also necessary to understand the associations that speakers of the target language share. Associations help form a bridge between language and meaning. If people have different associations, they may interpret the same sentence differently. For communicating in a foreign language, the most important type of association is indicative association, which is related to the literature, customs, history, and so on, of a people. When Japanese people communicate with Americans in English, this is the type of association that often causes them problems, since they do not know much about the indicative associations of Americans. Associations related to color are one large, important area of associations that Japanese people must have an understanding of in order to communicate successfully with Americans.

Americans seem to have a greater awareness of color than Japanese people do. Americans have more terms for color, more words for different shades, and so on. Japanese people may need to learn to distinguish between two colors in English that have the same name in Japanese. Americans also seem to have more associations related to colors than Japanese do.

Americans and Japanese do not necessarily use the same colors for the same objects. For example, Americans have a wider range of yellow and Japanese have a wider range of red. So the sun and fire are red in Japanese and yellow in English.

Americans and Japanese share some of the same color

associations, but there are many differences. Japanese people are often not familiar with color associations based on American culture and daily life. Since the use of color terminology is often based on cultural convention rather than descriptions of reality, Japanese people who communicate with Americans in English have to learn the American way to use colors.

Some American events are related to colors. These are often unfamiliar to Japanese people.

blue: depression, obscenity, the best, nobility, loyalty, strictness, and lack of oxygen

red: passion

yellow: cowardice

green: envy, inexperience, newness, growth, sickness, and money.

white: fear, anger, virtue, and virginity

black: anger, mourning, confirmed or absolute, depressing or gloomy, and negative

purple: anger, passion, and elaborateness

It is helpful for Japanese people who communicate with Americans to know that those colors have such connotations. As for the expressions in each color in the previous section, they are culturally oriented, so they have to be learned item by item.

Color associations have much significance in American culture, and different patterns of color associations and expressions can be found between Americans and Japanese. It is a great help to Japanese who have contact with Americans if those differences of patterns of cultures are clarified.

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